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# EPA study can act as weapon

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Chicago Tribune

It could have been, should have been, stronger and blunter. But even so, last week's report from the Environmental Protection Agency should finally put a stake through the heart of the sophism that cigarette smoking is a matter of civil liberty because it harms no one except the smokers themselves.

Secondhand smoke does, indeed, hurt others, the EPA belatedly confirmed in a cautious compiling of data from a pile of other studies, some of which are more worrisome. Earlier drafts of the report drew flak from the tobacco industry and from health groups concerned about delays and revisions.

Particularly at risk, according to the EPA, are the spouses, coworkers and small children of smokers — those who can't escape the abusive air pollution created by those nearest and dearest to them.

The EPA chalked up 3,000 cancer deaths a year to secondhand smoke, many of them wives or husbands of smokers who are as careless about their spouses' lives and health as their own. The risk of getting cancer from cigarette smoke in the environment is higher than the danger from almost every chemical the EPA regulates, according to the agency's administrator, William K. Reilly.

Smoking parents cause 150,000 to 300,000 cases of respiratory infections such as bronchitis and pneumonia every year — just in babies and toddlers up to 18 months old. Secondhand smoke increases the risk of asthma in young children and makes the symptoms worse in 200,000 to 1 million youngsters. And it is a factor in the frequent middle-ear infections that plague so many children.

Any other environmental pollutant that inflicted so much harm on bystanders, especially children in their own homes, would surely set off urgent alarms. There would be multimillion-dollar lawsuits, government investigations, fines, expensive cleanups, public indignation.

But cigarettes are different, of course. The tobacco industry has always profited from economic, social and legal immunities that are inexplicable considering that it causes 435,000 deaths every year from cancer, heart disease and respiratory illnesses.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is going to start a public information campaign on television, radio and in newspapers to be called "Secondhand Smoke: We're All at Risk." A pair of congressmen plan to introduce legislation banning smoking in all federal office buildings and in most federally supported, indoor places serving children.

But so far, reducing tobacco's horrendous toll of death and illness seems to be of little concern to the new administration of President-elect Bill Clinton.

Clinton made a director of tobacco megacorporation RJR Nabisco the co-head of his transition team, with enormous influence over choosing his Cabinet and other members of his administration. He brushed off complaints about Vernon Jordan's blatant conflict of interest.

Al Gore, the vice president-elect who has never heard of an environmental concern he didn't embrace, doesn't even mention tobacco or smoking in his new book, "Earth in the Balance." He does talk about the problems of addiction to drugs, alcohol and even TV watching, but ignores cigarettes as the major cause of indoor air pollution.

Cigarette smoking has already been significantly reduced in the United States through a discouragingly slow combination of government pressures, changes in social climate, health worries, business initiatives — and the dying off of hard-core smokers. If we are lucky and the Clinton administration helps, the EPA report might accelerate progress toward a healthier, smoke-free society at least a little.

The EPA's report should remind employers they could be sued for endangering the health and lives of workers with excessive indoor air pollution. And it should give them more sound reasons for declaring entire buildings off-limits to smoking.

Reducing tobacco use is an issue that should have obvious appeal for Clinton. He said again this week that his plans for reducing the deficit depend on controlling fast-rising health care costs.

Smoking adds about $52 billion annually to the nation's health care bills, the federal government estimated in 1990. Health advocacy groups put the figure closer to $100 billion.

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